

Chris and Bernie The virtues of modesty

by Chuck Kleinhans

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CHRIS AND BERNIE is a good film with modest aims. A 16mm color, 25 minute documentary about two single mothers living together with their children, it's intended for general audiences, particularly women. The film is to be used to start discussions, obviously about the situations of single mothers, but it also contains the germ of ideas on women's roles, working mothers, cooperative/ communal/ collective living and child raising. In accomplishing what its makers intended, the film is a success and deserves wide use.

Bonnie Friedman and Deborah Schaffer have a filmmaking and political background in Newsreel, the late 60s national filmmaking and distribution network. Here they continue one of the basic Newsreel ideas: a film stands not alone as a cultural object, but comes out of a political movement—and returns to that movement. Thus CHRIS AND BERNIE is a film not merely to be passively viewed but to be used: used in organizing and education, and discussion.

This concept of film as a political tool rather than as a self-contained object is not unusual in the United States. Many of the filmmakers who passed through or who were influenced by Newsreel have held to it. And a number of recent films have reflected it, for example many of those distributed by New Day, and those made by Kartemquin in Chicago. However, this concept of political film has come under considerable attack lately. The documentary style and inherent assumption that a realistic portrayal of the subject suffices have been criticized for presenting but not analyzing a situation. It may place the analysis in the mouth of an interviewed spokesperson who ties up the loose ends instead of the whole film providing political analysis. Yet in a very significant way such a criticism of form misses the essential point. These films are not made for a passive audience (as the recent U.S. documentary tradition of Leacock, Pennebaker, the Maysles, and

Wiseman are) but with a post-film discussion in mind. Which is not to exempt such films from a political critique. Indeed, such a critique becomes even more important because they must be judged in terms of what material they provide for the audience's own analysis.

Another conception that came out of Newsreel—that the appropriate subject matter of political films is mass and public action, has been used to criticize films like *CHRIS AND BERNIE*: The subject matter itself is found to be not political, or not sufficiently so. Critics who believe this are frequently convinced that a film's politics are stronger when the dialogue (or more often monologue) is delivered: (1) dramatically, (2) by a man, (3) who is preferably black, brown, red, or yellow, (4) loaded up with phrases like “class struggle,” (5) etc., etc. Perhaps I exaggerate, and no one any longer takes mere outward signs as identical with political substance. And at the same time I should acknowledge that many Newsreel films were incredibly powerful, important, and correct in their time in using such images: armed Black Panthers surrounding the Oakland Courthouse; Columbia students occupying University buildings. But I frequently have the suspicion that left critics of movement films expect such works to say everything in 30 minutes when you can't even read the *Communist Manifesto* aloud in that time.

What we have in this new genre of political documentary, the discussion film, is the process and political struggle of everyday life. We see Bernie building a stairway while she tells us, voice over, that she didn't want to be a secretary and fought the welfare bureaucracy to get into an OEO carpentry training program that was “only for men.” A small struggle, an individual one, yet one that was undertaken and won. It gave her material benefits and self-respect, and it provides an example for others.

These films show small changes, which is the very stuff of change, the foundation for those dramatic public and mass activities called demonstrations, strikes, and revolutions. Small changes are no small thing.

For those who are open to thinking that daily life is significant, these political discussion films show and explain that the lives of ordinary people, of women and children, are significant. After a screening of *GROWING UP FEMALE* to an audience of men and women, I remember a feminist's remark: “I'll bet that's the first time any of those men have listened to women talk about their own lives for 35 minutes without walking away or interrupting them.” And these films also contain many truths. In Kartemquin's *NOW WE LIVE ON CLIFTON* we see Mom sit in the living room to read the paper after dinner while the kids wash dishes. (Dad fixed dinner before leaving for his night shift cab driving; Mom gets home from her secretary's job after he leaves. Not exactly your middle class politics of housework.) “Oh, Eisenhower's on,” she says, turning on the TV. “I mean Nixon.” She proceeds to scan the

paper while the President drones on about the energy crisis. That says a lot about working class attitudes toward capitalist politicians.

All of which seems like a mighty long introduction to a review of a modest film like CHRIS AND BERNIE. But what I'm trying to say is that the very unpretentiousness of the form and the subject should not be mistaken. There aren't very many films available for grade school and high school classrooms, for women's groups, for ordinary working people, that show without condescension or romanticization people living and changing their lives, and making those small decisions which are political, though not dramatic.

CHRIS AND BERNIE shows single mothers getting along pretty well, thank you. Chris is a nurse, was on welfare, has a 4-year-old daughter. Bernie is on welfare now, learning carpentry, has a 6-year-old son. They describe their relationship as sisterly, and they think living with other people who have or like children is better than the nuclear family. At the end we learn their 18 months together ended when Chris decided to live elsewhere with a man and become a midwife. Bernie joined a new group of people living together and is a carpenter in upstate New York. Not very dramatic, but important in their lives and as an example for others.

The film leaves all kinds of questions: Is living together like this really viable? What are the economics of it? Who has the responsibility for the children? How do they balance the necessary demands of work with the legitimate time and energy demands of the kids and the need for space of their own? What are their relations with other people? With men? Good questions for a good discussion.

Distribution

CHRIS AND BERNIE is distributed by New Day Films, P.O. Box 315, Franklin Lakes, N.J. 07417

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